

Memory Bells

by Agnes G. Brogan

CONNIE looked down to the busy street, through a blur of snowflakes. At least, Connie told herself determinedly that snowflakes were accountable for the blur; then, she wiped her eyes.

"It's Merry Christmas time," Connie said to her old yellow cat. "Who ever heard of Christmas without the Merry? So cheer up, Fender, and let's join in the game." At the little "Shopper" just around the corner she stood longest of all. And all at once into Connie's bright eyes came a speculative light. The window was full of small framed pictures, most of them with the Christmas spirit. There were the usual eight-clad children looking up broad winners, there were landscapes of snowy fields with distant windows aglow—Connie studied them all; she was seeing in vision the winding hill road of the place where she had spent her last summer vacation; the church with its swaying bell in the steeple, the queer little bridge over the deep and beautiful stream—a bridge with white along its sides where countless lovers had sat and courted. The old lady who had been Connie's volunteer teacher told her, with the pink coming and going in her withered cheeks, about the lovers. For it was there that her own husband had asked, and had been answered—his question. The way that Connie had chanced to visit this beautiful country place and to meet where the dear old lady was quite remarkable chance too. She had stepped out on the trolley car for one useful day in the country and had chosen this station at random. And when she had stopped to admire the wonderful roses in the old lady's garden—and they had spent some agreeable time together—the old lady, Mrs. Martha Snow by name, had said:

"My dear! Why don't you come and visit me for a week or two? I'm lonely for a young sweet face."

And Connie had gone, that was all. What her later water colors had been

glorified memories of that delightful visit. Now Connie had a new inspiration. She would paint the queer little bridge over an icy stream, and its seats should be covered with snow. She could fancy just how the trees would look waving naked branches. And she'd paint the church in the hollow with lights in the windows gleaming over the snow and the bell in the tower a-swaying for Christmas.

Oh, Connie was very happy as she hurried home to her attic, but there, in the temperamental way artists have, she began to draw instead, working in a fever of enthusiasm—the sitting room of the old house where she had been a guest, with Martha Snow herself seated in the firelight, just half of her peaceful profile showing beneath its halo of white hair.

There was holly above the old fireplace and a boy's stocking hanging there. Connie never stopped until she had completed the picture, then ran with it breathlessly to the "Shopper" around the corner.

"Yes, we will display it," a smiling old man agreed.

The picture sold. Of course you were prepared for that; but the strange part was that before it was sold Connie had added her other views to the "Shopper" window, and her discerning purchaser had bought them every one. While the other Christmas studies pleased him not at all; Connie could not count the number of times that she passed that window, first closing her eyes childishly in the hope that her picture would not be there when she opened them. And it was the day but one before Christmas that the "Shopper" manager seeing her peering about, beckoned her inside.

"You have pleased one of our best customers," said the manager, "and when we mentioned your peculiar condition of sale he suggested talking the matter over with you that you might both come to a satisfactory bargain. Our customer thinks that you possess wonderful artistic ability. We have given him your address."

"Is he," asked Connie falteringly, "a philanthropist?"

Some way she did not want her purchaser to be just a philanthropist and spoil all future ambitious hope.

"Mr. Armstrong is a man who usually drives a pretty shrewd bargain," the "Shopper" manager said.

So, though it was early afternoon, Connie hurried home to turn on a gas blaze and don her most presentable dress so that she might make a favorable impression as a successful young welder of the brush. The purchaser might arrive any minute. But it was the next afternoon when he came and Connie was wearing a dungieen apron.

The purchaser was young and tall and good looking, and the golden cat greeted him with a purring rub, which was to Connie a recommendation as to his honesty.

Mr. Hubert Armstrong came directly to business.

"Your sketches have for me a double interest, Miss Carroll," he said.

"You have drawn remarkably some of the happiest scenes of my boyhood. Scenes which I am ashamed to say I had half-forgotten. The world of business absorbs much of human kindness I am afraid, and sometimes a struggle for success causes us to leave much that is tender behind. I am grateful to you for awakening in me that tenderness which I had almost buried."

The man's voice broke huskily. He drew forth an old sitting-room picture.

"Peace on Earth" was the name she had given it.

"That," said Hubert Armstrong, "is the living room of my home in Hillcrest—the place where I was born. This white-haired woman's profile is the peaceful profile of my long-lost mother. That little bulging stocking might have been my own stocking just as it used to hang there years ago—Tell me—his tone was eager—'how did you come by your dream?'"

"I visited last summer," Connie told him, "in that same old house in Hillcrest with Mrs. Martha Snow, who is visited me."

The man nodded hastily.

"I see," he said, "it is quite simple after all. Martha Snow is my mother's widowed sister." A dull red crept to his cheek.

"I had almost forgotten that Aunt Martha asked me years ago to allow her to continue on in the old homestead. It was left mine by will. So she's there yet, and the church bell still chimes out for Christmas!"

"You have sounded the memory bells for me, Miss Carroll."

It seemed that the purchaser had almost forgotten her in his musings. Now that she looked at him closely his face was threaded by lines of care, his fine eyes sorrowful beneath their sternness. Connie put forth a friendly hand.

"Why," she said, "so you are Martha Snow's nephew. Then there can be no question of bargain between us, the pictures are freely yours."

The man spoke abruptly.

"You paint to sell do you not?" he asked. "Isn't that what your studio is for?"

Connie shook her head ruefully.

"Mostly," she replied, "my studio is just to live in."

"And you live alone?"

"I am quite alone in the world," she told him gravely.

Then her irrepressible smile broke forth.

"Unless," she added, "you would count Fender?" She caught the cat in her arms.

"I live—alone—too," Hubert Armstrong said slowly.

"I know what it means. There's not

much difference between the glided walls of an apartment and these walls of yours here."

"Not when it comes to loneliness," Connie agreed. "We were going to look much more cheerful," she went



Connie Studied Them All.

on. "When you interrupted me with your knock. I was climbing the ladder to hang a holly wreath."

"Let me do it for you," the man said. Before she could refuse his assistance he was on the ladder, the wreath in his hands.

"That's better," Connie told him as side by side they stood looking up at the crimson berries.

"It's the first time in years," Hubert Armstrong said with a boyish laugh, "that I've done that sort of thing. Gives me a thrill of old Christmas. Makes me wish for a fireplace with a filled stocking before it. The fireplace of your picture makes me long to go skating on a creek—your creek, back at Hillcrest. Makes me want to taste turkey again over the old dining-room table."

"Yes!" breathed Connie, "and hear the church bell ring out across the snow."

Engaged the man gazed into those other eager eyes beneath his own.

"Let's do it," he said impulsively.

"Let us have a real, joyful old-fashioned sort of Christmas, you and I, back at Aunt Martha's. I will call her on the phone. It would delight her heart."

"It would be just 'peace on earth' to me," Connie said happily.

And that Christmas eve as she gazed wide awake through her attic window the moon shone down through the holly wreath.

"Merry Christmas," whispered Connie while the old moon smiled benignly with a promise of happy Christmases to come.

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